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HABITAT AND EXPERIENCE

An Anthropology of the Sonic Agglomeration

This contribution provides a contemporary introduction into research and artistic practices related to the study of sonic agglomerations from the perspective of an anthropology of sound. The article has four parts within which its author traverses and experiences an agglomeration such as Copenhagen by employing the very methods, practices and explorative approaches that are introduced in this article. Starting with “Spatial Volumes, Secluded and Eroding” (part 1), the author focuses then on “Protocol and Dérive” (part 2), „The Noise of the Other“ (part 3), “An Escape to Recreate” (part 4) and asks toward the end the question “What Might a City Be?” In this way the urban sonic experience is unfolded through recent research approaches within or close to the field of sound studies.



I am standing at a beach. The wind is joyfully crashing against my face. With a deep breath I move forward, into the softer sand. I can taste the salty harshness of the ocean water. In my back I can still sense the heavy car traffic, driving by the beach. This beach is not outside the city. Amager Strandpark is situated inside Copenhagen's precinct. The beach is part of the city as can be parks and woods, a fairground, lakes, sports grounds, as well as mountains or creeks. Cities are never only urban in the narrowest sense. Especially European cities, but also cities on other continents, crafted by centuries of inhabitants, aristocratic rule, and more recent desires for democratic welfare have incorporated all sorts of areas that provide room for activities different than the famous „Métro, boulot, dodo“, a saying following a poem by French poet Pierre Béarn or „Birth, School, Work, Death“, a phrase from a song by the British rockband The Godfathers.¹ These areas do not serve directly the main purpose of commuting to a productive job, training for a productive job, executing one's job duties or recreating to join the workforce refreshed – only to leave one with exactly nothing but job-related activities. „Métro, boulot, bistro, mégots, dodo, zéro.“² An empty life, it seems.

But parks, beaches and the other sites mentioned in the beginning of this article, seem to serve different purposes yet being an intrinsic and crucial part of the notion of a contemporary city as habitat. More often the city marketing division of a major metropolis or even capital tends to focus on activities that can seem to be mainly recreational. These seemingly superfluous areas, open for serendipitous encounters, drifting conversations, and exploring personal sensibilities, providing all sorts of sensorial pleasures and room for rather purposeless activities, are thoroughly functionalized in the early twenty-first century. On the following pages I will introduce some areas of discussion concerning the city, the countryside or the urban agglomeration that have been discussed within the wider area of sound studies, the analytical and historical study of sound cultures, practices and artifacts. This introduction is written from the perspective of an *anthropology of sound*. This means it follows a tradition of anthropological research³ that investigates the concepts and experiences of being on this planet through the study of historical documents, through philological interpretation, through the discussion of concepts, but also through field research, through field recording and listening, through autoethnographic studies, sound performances and even autofictional writing.⁴ My exploration of experiencing a habitat will therefore follow situated listening experiences and now and then also perform erratic jumps and a surprising narrative zigzagging. When following this dynamic you might also follow a particular sonic experience.

1 The Godfathers 1988: track 1

2 Béarn 1951

3 Schulze 2021: 5-10

4 cf. Schulze 2018; 2021: 1-20

Regarding sounds on the countryside one can find a certain idealization of rural and pre-modern life in the writings of Raymond Murray Schafer from the 1970s. This approach was motivated strongly at the time by an urge to preserve the historical soundscape. This idealism, however, stands today in contrast with a far more complex, dialectic and paradoxical notion of the city in the twenty-first century. Whereas the techno-utopia of the city as a complex machine for everyday life, devoid of plants and dominated by air condition and surveillance sensors still exists in the visualizations for the so-called *Smart City*, often with a strong touch of *Capitalist Realism*,⁵ it is now more often escorted by the reality of two other concepts of the city: on the one side the city as an agglomeration of temporary homes, refugee camps, slum-like housing, and protest gatherings; and on the other side the city as a meticulously crafted environment for upper middle-class employees, their desires, spare time-activities, self-optimization goals, and lifestyles of self-presentation – the famous *Angestellten*, that Siegfried Kracauer sketched in his essay in 1930. In these three concepts of the city its contemporary paradoxes, societal tensions, and political inconsistencies become obvious: a smart city ruled by surveillance capitalism,⁶ an agglomeration of precarious housing, an upper middle-class playground.

Here, on this beach, I find facilities to train and optimize my body. I can observe other city dwellers while they are practicing the same activities. I can just wander around aimlessly, following my train of thoughts or associations, buy a coffee or a snack by using *MobilePay*, and redirect my attention to the audio podcast that plays through my headphones. Whilst listening to the recollection of political events of the last day on a podcast called *Der Tag*, from the Deutschlandfunk in Germany, I remember how Hildegard Westerkamp introduced me to the sonic environment of a beach well-known to her: Kitsilano Beach, representing a day in January, in Vancouver – expanding after four and a half minutes into unexpected dimensions of sonically intimate imaginations, dreamt away. Those imaginations exceed any topographical or touristic account of a place:

„In another dream, when I entered a stone cottage, I entered a soundscape made by four generations of a peasant family sitting around a large wooden table eating and talking: smacking and clicking and sucking and spitting and telling and biting and singing and laughing and weeping and kissing and gurgling and whispering“⁷

Daydreams and quirky meanderings are an intrinsic, a defining quality of how one experiences a given environment: be it urban, be it rural, both in the purest

5 Fisher 2009

6 Zuboff 2019

7 Westerkamp 1989: 5:21

sense, or be it amalgamated to the strangest mixture of technological connectivity and inventiveness and ongoing biospherical processes and metabolisms that one could think of. The city indeed provides a ground for these experiences that transcend one's encounters in the physical world into an area of intimate reflections, personal desires, or imaginations. These imaginations are rooted in a city's area. They cannot be regarded as arbitrary, but as surprising and often awkward and uncomfortable effects of one's experiences with a city. To acknowledge the impact of these proprioceptive and erratic experiences with the sounds of a city, it is necessary not to indulge in the desire that attentive listening and a trained ear alone would allow us to exhaustively map, categorize, and interpret the sounds of a city. A scientific concept of accuracy is not sufficient here. It only leads to a more spiritual form of audiopietism that believes a social transformation could easily be achieved by a more trained and detailed listening activity. Alas, it is never that simple.

An expanded notion of sound research as it has been developed in the area of sound studies in general in the last two decades needs to include diverging approaches to listening, to sensibilities, and to forms of precision.⁸ In the area of an anthropology of sound, this radical diversity can indeed be found,⁹ if one wishes to take a starting point in the broad range of sensibilities that can be found among all of the *humanoid aliens*¹⁰ like us on this planet. In this case it is crucial to not assume an identical *sensory corpus*:¹¹ the bodies, their sensibilities, their entero- and their exteroceptive habits can be widely different. One might even arrive at a point, where idiosyncrasies can appear more insightful and instructive than the fantastic invention of a general model for perception across all centuries, on all continents, in all societal frameworks, and in all biographically diverse sequences of experience. In research, such an abstraction might tell us primarily a lot about a scholar's urge to apply such a model to a given context, with the purpose of mastering its interpretation. In contrast, the idiosyncrasies in each situation, experienced by a particular humanoid alien like you or me are rarely noble enough to receive conceptual or scholarly recognition.

Idiosyncrasies are the sensible effects of one sonic corpus and its remanent experiences, its struggle with the given technological and societal dispositives, as well as the urge to represent yourself as a recognizable, respected, genuine, and loved persona. It is through this ongoing struggle that dwellers in a metropolis effectively develop their personae – aside from merely moralist judgements about a city's sensory signature. Living, working, loving, and enjoying a particular habitat is not bound to its accurate, maybe inspiring design, but to the experiences and

8 cf. Bull 2018; Eidsheim 2019; Bull and Cobussen 2020; Collins 2020

9 Schulze 2018; Robinson 2020; Steingo and Sykes 2020; Schulze 2021

10 Schulze 2018: 7f.

11 Schulze 2018

maybe life-changing encounters and decisions that take place in around it. Each of us tries to find her or his or their adequate precision of sensibility:¹² how can one manage to exist and thrive in a complex and challenging environment – and still be inclined to trust one’s hunches, one’s more and more developed sensibility for a moment, a relational constellation, a situation, a given environment?

Again, I find myself in my office on the fourth floor of the department, where I work. I can remember all the sounds that are now and then oozing into this office space, from various group rehearsals of choirs, bands, chamber music ensembles. For me, they do not qualify as unwanted sounds, though I did not intentionally request their presence. Being in midst of various propagations of sound signals is most importantly a genuine experience of an anthropology of sound in the twenty-first century. For me, exactly this experience in a habitat represents my existence as a sonic persona. The room, in which I work, expands consequentially into all directions, sonically. My auditory sensibility is stretched out way beyond these walls: my *acoustic horizon*¹³ includes all these soundings, sound practices, audible activities around me, above, below, besides of me. The spatial volume in which I am placed right is secluded, but it erodes into its surroundings.

1. Spatial Volumes, Secluded and Eroding

Alone in a gigantic metropolis. Any young person moving to one of the larger habitats in a country will experience moments of feeling lonely, discarded, forgotten, abandoned, of being in solitary confinement. However, they are not; yet still this sensation might overwhelm a person’s self-perception, self-presentation, reflection and idea of this given agglomeration. Anyone’s solitude in such a rather small, rectangular shaped apartment structure is, though, original. Historically speaking, it is a rather exceptional situation to reside on your own and in your own room. This is not only an issue since Virginia Woolf reminded readers of the feminist implications when enjoying the pleasures of *A Room of One’s Own*. Today, almost one hundred years late one can recognize in her writing a general reflection on the struggles when living a life on one’s own. In her essay of the same title, she wrote in 1929:

„In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century.“¹⁴

12 Schulze 2018: 163–186

13 cf. Schafer 1993; Blesser 2006

14 Woolf 1929/2018: 70

For the longer part of Western history, these safe areas for grooming one's own and genuine wishes, ideas, concepts, interpretations, even for new thinking, novels, artworks, all sorts of activities were exclusively restricted to persons who could be read as male, white, alphabetized, employed, bourgeois, cisgender, heterosexual, European and officially registered consumer citizens.

“If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room [...] – she was always interrupted”¹⁵

The urge and the lack, the desire and the pain articulated here by Woolf underlines a century later the unmeasurably exceptional luxury that living and working in a secluded spatial volume represents. A person who could not produce the aforementioned qualities of privilege did and in a majority of cases still today experiences a radically different sonic environment when trying very hard to focus on some intricate tasks, maybe in some refined artform or craft:

„Generally material circumstances are against it. Dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down. Further, accentuating all these difficulties and making them harder to bear is the world's notorious indifference.“¹⁶

For most of the history, not only in European culture, but also in other habitats on other continents, it seemed therefore next to impossible if not thoroughly undesirable to live on one's own. Life did take place in larger tribes, families, amongst neighbors and friends, stranded refugees and accepted nominal aunts or uncles. Living together with a *stepfamily*, including all sorts of acquaintances and supportive friends and partners, was effectively the standard way of living together in most societal strata across the spectrum. Historically, only the most noble, gifted, richest humanoid aliens were allowed and capable before the twentieth century to spend their lives alone in some sense – however always served by and cared for by dozens of servants, maids, cooks, and all sorts of minions. The second largest group that was even forced to live on their own were rejects, expelled, imprisoned and all sorts of humanoid aliens that were considered inadequately adapted to the given societal norms, requirements, and protocols – be they practicing divergent sexual practices, be they stricken with harsh medical conditions, diseases or unusual corporeal features, or be they incapable of contributing intellectually and in word or actions to the requirements of a labor society. The third group, granted the benefit of somewhat also living

15 Woolf 1929/2018: 88f

16 Woolf 1929/2018: 70

their days outside of a common social framework, were bound religiously to a solitary life: the monks and nuns, the martyrs, hermits, priests, pilgrims, or other persons who indulged in spiritual practices. Only for these people it was even potentially possible, they were granted the luxury or forced into this exceptional situation of not living closely to others – who did not happen to be their servants or lackeys.

However, what had to be recognized as an exceptional form of existence for centuries and millennia is nowadays a rather common experience for many citizens in Europe and in a growing portion of habitats on this planet. Living alone is not only possible but is regarded by many even a preferable and joyful way to live. But not only when living in an apartment for one person many citizens enjoy in the twenty-first century the benefits of various appliances to execute household duties – be it a washing machine, a dishwasher or a robot vacuum –, even having manifold delivery services offering all sorts of goods, from groceries, over flowers, all sorts of warehouse products, even full menus, drinks, not to speak of all the streaming services providing a wide range of entertainment options. If the adequate amount of salary, income, or crypto speculation is being transferred to the bank account all these perks wait to be ordered. Yet, this upper middle-class Elysium of living within a tribe of servant robots and delivery drones ignores the many social groups that might only rarely if ever benefit from these. Those are not seldomly the very workers who provide in the end these exact services and making a life of one's own even barely possible: as part-time employees of highly-networked, often gamified, and surveillance-happy delivery services; as contributors to all sorts of tiny tasks on a micro payment level on *Amazon Mechanical Turk* for instance; as minimum wage workers in the meatpacking industry and as workers in all sorts of production facilities all over this planet, producing the goods and commodities that will then be delivered for the lowest shelf-price to us, their happy consumers. The joyful life in an automated middle-class apartment relies on the exploitation of lower classes, however often on another continent, and under the harshest, often unbearable work conditions. The silence and recluse of a European apartment – especially in focus during the videocall-discovering period of a pandemic that started 2020 – just covers up the pain of capitalist exploitation in another country. Silence is a marker of privilege and of exploitation in one part of this planet that simply benefits from pain and often screaming, shouting and exhaustion at another place on this planet.

The silence in an apartment or at a workplace is, therefore, a tainted one. Even more so as the sounds of other city dwellers obviously ooze into the location me or you are in right now, reading this text. The technical and ritual auditory dispositives within which citizens live make social class and intersectional segregations very tangible. Silence and noise, annoyance and noise abatement

are social markers. It is a power relation that is materialized in sounds: who gets to regulate his sound environment – and who needs to subject herself to the technical, juridical or societal regulations of sounds, articulations, noises, activities and pleasures? The power to regulate sound experiences is a defining power grounded on class and race, gender, abilities or age. The most tangible effect can be observed as soon as new technological inventions, tools and machines enter a city's sphere.

These inventions are most of the time born out of the drive of capitalist acceleration and investment, in their earliest inception also rooted in the hoarded capital of exploitation culture and slaveholder societies that allowed to fund industrialization in Europe, starting in the UK with the capital of its colonies.¹⁷ These inventions are often hailed at the beginning, and their mechanical sounds are quickly regarded and experienced as a glimpse into an optimistic future of benefits and pleasure, travels and recreation, an easier life and more meaningful social connections – at least, again, for an upper middle-class.

These machines, however, erode the secluded spaces sooner or later. Sounds that were hailed as futuristic turn into a mere nuisance as they become dominant, an hourly harassment. At this point, the same upper middle-class representatives call for thorough regulation.¹⁸ A utopian notion, possibly connected to these sounds, lies now in ruins of an everyday hassle, of stress and a relentless pressure. Citizens who oversee a certain power demand to set a limit for their use. They wish to retain the comfortable silence in their homes and workplaces, gyms or transportation vehicles – but still profit from the newest and most pleasurable innovations. The erosion of secluded spatial volumes shall have a limit as soon as one feels personally attacked. The jobs and apartments, the everyday environments for lower class workers, however, are still constantly attacked sonically, perforated by wireless messages, under pressure and stress, in sweat and pain. No comfortable silence to be found here. No recluse in blissful quietude. Or is it possible that this quietude or silence might only be experienced as horror? The anthropological variety of sensory experiences surely makes this more than just a faint possibility.

2. Protocol and Dérive

Lives in a sonic agglomeration do adhere to existing protocols. The routes to a supermarket and one's manner of choosing, combining, paying for, and carrying home of produce and products often follow a recurrent pattern. So are the routes

17 Yusoff 2018

18 cf. Thompson 2002

to a workplace, a gym, a doctor, hospital, or a selection of bars, restaurants, clubs or all other sorts of leisure time attractions that one might frequently visit. Psychogeographically speaking, one's most out-trodden ways in a sonic agglomeration are strictly limited and often not only spatially restricted – but also in their distribution in time: most do only very rarely, only for special shifts, visit their workplace on a Sunday, their supermarket at 3am in the morning or their gym at a time, when their presence at a workplace or at a family dinner is strictly required. Those protocols structure everyday activities and therefore also the required sound practices¹⁹ as well as listening experiences. They expose their characteristic rhythmic structure and present a specific form of anthropological *rhythming*²⁰ that allows for their *rhythmanalysis*. Rhythmanalysis though is still in the 2020s more of an emerging practice.²¹ Derived from Henri Lefebvres work of the 1980s,²² inspired by Gaston Bachelard²³ who in turn cites the yet untranslated work of Portuguese philosopher Lúcio Alberto Pinheiro dos Santos from the late 1920s as an inspiration. Across the decades one suspicion seems to be shared by Pinheiro dos Santos and Bachelard, by Lefebvre as well as twenty-first century researchers on rhythm: rhythm represents an integrative, transversal and generative force that merges the „material, biological, and psychological“.²⁴ Understanding *The Ontology of Vibrational Force* as narrated by Steve Goodman²⁵ is for them a hint at rhythm as one major hyperobject²⁶ not yet recognized and addressed as such. As soon as rhythms are acknowledged as hyperobjects ruling peoples' lives, structuring the everyday and the extraordinary, guiding them throughout the social and within the intimate as well as the professional, one can recognize the huge role protocols and their disruption play in cities and habitats of all kinds.

Examples of actual rhythmanalyses can be found in the work of various artists and researchers recently, especially within an anthropology of sound. By means of an intensive field research²⁷ or an equally intense artistic work²⁸ they study plazas and streets in their material and sonic experientiality. In their analysis it becomes clear how these spaces within habitats are materially activated by intersecting protocols and occasional *dérives*. Venäläinen, Pöllänen and Muršič note for instance during their research on the streets of Ljubljana:

19 Altman 1992; Maier 2020

20 Maier and Van Drie 2022

21 cf. Brighenti and Kärrholm 2018; Revol 2019

22 Lefebvre and Regulier 1985; Lefebvre 1992

23 Bachelard 1936, 1958

24 Bachelard 1936/2000: 137

25 Goodman 2009: 81–84

26 Morton 2013

27 Venäläinen, Pöllänen and Muršič 2021

28 Auinger and Offenhuber 2021

„Even though the recording has a feeling of space and one can hear the sounds moving on some kind of a multidimensional plane, it is difficult to say and to mentally map where exactly the cars are coming from or where they are going ... the sonic representation as transformed by the recording technology and the listener’s limited cognitive capabilities is just too simplified: the sound arrives and then goes away. There is constantly way too much information to pay attention to all the details or to be able to write everything down during the first listening.“²⁹

The existing protocols of traffic actually result in a sort of sonic distortion. And after years of doing research on the famous Alexanderplatz in Berlin the sound artist Sam Auinger and the design and infrastructure scholar Dietmar Offenhuber come to the conclusion:

„Self-programmable, playful, or exploited, regulated or strictly separated by functions, the plaza is a space for emerging public experiments. A space of learning how collectively to steward needed changes is a question of creativity and the power of public discourse.“³⁰

Here, the protocols lead and inspire derives, they foster new usages and appropriations. While protocols and cyclical rhythms structure the matrix of everyday activities and provide a routine foundation, it is at the same time crucial to find instances and moments for breaking out of these precise protocols – for city dwellers as well as for researchers or artists. The famous *dérives* of the *Situationist International* (1957-72) provide a conceptual and even anthropologically intriguing model how this can take place in a systematic way: one can follow, therefore, a new routine that is combinatoric, structural and basically arbitrary in order to explore a given and maybe way too familiar environment in a radically new way. Why not – as the situationists proposed – explore your hometown, let’s say: Copenhagen, by following the streets with a map in your hand of a totally different city, from another country, another continent, or another historical period? One could explore Copenhagen with a map of London from the year 1665 or from Lagos of 1963? Why not cut through the habitat according to one longitude or latitude line? Why not drift along for a whole day, driven and drawn by the desires, the observations, irritations or inclinations in your habitat? In his *Theory of the Dérive* Guy Debord wrote in 1956:

„In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement

29 Venäläinen, Pöllänen and Muršič 2021: 238

30 Auinger and Offenhuber 2021: 209

and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. [...] One can *dérive* alone, but all indications are that the most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people who have reached the same level of awareness, since cross-checking these different groups' impressions makes it possible to arrive at more objective conclusions. [...] The average duration of a *dérive* is one day, considered as the time between two periods of sleep. The starting and ending times have no necessary relation to the solar day, but it should be noted that the last hours of the night are generally unsuitable for *dérives*.³¹

The *Dérive* is clearly a revolutionary strategy in the sense of the word – in the same way that the iconoclast happenings of the classic avantgardes, the Dadaists or Futurists were intended to cut across the demarcations between artistic practice and everyday life. Drifting in the way described by Debord indeed breaks up, necessarily the confinements of employment, of road traffic regulations, even of basic decency, and the policing of street life, bars, restaurants and sex work. The situationists' intention at the time was to break up the highly restrained if not imprisoned social strata of French and European societies in the 1950s; but this new strategy quickly proved to be capable of indeed breaking up all sorts of strict protocols and seemingly unquestionable implicit conventions.³²

In this way the breaking out and the embodying of protocols are today but also historically bound to each other in a dialectic relation. Obviously, there is no *dérive*, no excess, no socially radical or progressive practice if there is no protocol or social convention as backdrop and foundation. In every historical social contract there exist lighter and more grave violations of this protocol. This holds true for the rule of patriarchal slaveowner dynasties in Europe, in its colonies and in other patriarchal societies as well as for aristocratic societies, for people under a religious rule and for societies under totalitarian law as well as under the rule of capitalist excessive growth and exploitation culture in today's world. Minor violations can be integrated, even celebrated as representing the superiority of the very system in place; major violations, however, can seem almost hard to articulate properly at all within a hegemonic social and ontological framework of a given culture. Can we even think today of leading an actual life not under the rule of austerity, of job and budget considerations these days? Is it possible to even imagine a laicist life within societies being governed according to biblical principles of Christianity, of another religious system or under the rule of a royal family?³³

31 Debord 1956 (unpaginated).

32 cf. Wark 2011

33 cf. Graeber 2004

The unthinkable, however, might become a new foundation of everyday life a few centuries into the future. Whereas the concept of *creative destruction*,³⁴ in recent decades rephrased in the public discourse as *creative disruption*³⁵ can seem by now mainly a welcome buzzword to advertise the threats of disaster capitalism,³⁶ it is still an observable fact that existing and substantial protocols also in our societies can and must be broken up now and then: in order to start a conversation about the conventions on which they are grounded. Protocols need to be left for a *dérive*, they need to be ignored, maybe even mocked and forgotten – just to rebuild and reconstruct new and all too often only slightly different protocols. Aren't these now so much better suited and adapted to the challenges of our societies? Sometimes one indeed needs to reconstruct one's ship on the open sea: sometimes one needs to start afresh from the bottom and not just by gradual reconstruction. This reconstruction can start with serendipity or with anger, with social unrest or with personal depression. We can glimpse into worlds of tomorrow through these cracks. Some light might then come in.

3. The Noise of the Other

All activities, all actions, all developments that take place in a material atmosphere and its particles result in pressure waves expanding spherically into space, reflected and dampened only by hindering materials in their way of expansion. As *humanoid aliens* you and I can take note of these pressure waves through the nerves in our skin, in our various vestibular organs, scattered all over our bodies, and – obviously – through the eardrum and our hearing nerves inside the cochlea, the hearing center of our inner ear. Total and radical, physically immeasurable silence is as improbable and rare on this planet as an instant of total and radical darkness: it might occur, but only in rather specific areas and spaces and timeframes – and most of us humanoid aliens would rather prefer not to stay in those areas for too long. It becomes unbearable as almost any sort of radical and total sensory deprivation. However, *unwanted sound*³⁷ – so the agreed and anthropologically stable definition of noise – intrudes again and again in one's personal space. Or, to phrase it differently: again and again a dweller assigns affects of rejection and revulsion to particular sounds.

These sounds themselves, however, are never stable throughout history. They are object to a continuous shift of surprise, excitement or repulsion, domestication, normalization, maybe ennui – just to start anew with sounds that

34 Schumpeter 1942

35 Dru 1992

36 Klein 2007

37 Thompson 2017

are still surprisingly new and unheard. In premodern times such effects of novelty were mainly provided by an encounter with unknown cultures, newly invented instruments or tools, shocking natural catastrophes, undiscovered animals or even unexpected acoustic illusions around buildings or extreme landscape phenomena. The modern capitalist acceleration however of commodities, their sonic signatures as well as their design of functional and brand sounds intends not to cease its invention, production and distribution of shocking otherness that is easy to domesticate. The music and entertainment industry capitalizes basically on the energizing potential of these sounds which also speed up consumption. Most of the gadget sounds that annoy you today will, as a matter of fact, have been normalized to a nostalgic memory in ten or twenty years' time. You might remember the aggressive distortion of an electrified Fender Stratocaster, the harshly gated drums in a 1980s pop song production, the highly pitched sequences from a Roland TB-303 or the accelerated voice performances or samples in the contemporary genre of *Hyperpop*. All these examples of a sonic extravaganza surprised and maybe shocked many of their listeners at the first time of hearing. But they also excited an even larger if not gigantic audience of listeners, dancers and performers ever thereafter. The aggressive attack from distortion is the original novelty sound that might more quickly than one assumes be turned into a remarkable and enjoyed signature of modernity, contemporaneity, futurist potential and of an energetic past. The stronger the shock as well as the repulsion at the beginning of its introduction the more fundamental and lasting the embedding of this new sound in our contemporary sound culture. The example of *autotune*, a pitch correction effect for singing voices in popular music is another example: as annoying it might have seemed at the beginning of its appearance, and as elitist and condescending its first assessment were – this effect has become now one of the most pervasive and continuously used effects, across all genres.

But whereas such cultural sounds can be domesticized in the process of capitalist consumption and the hype cycle of fashion and invention, this does not hold true for many of our domestic sounds or sound events in the neighborhood. Young parents might hate the noise of adolescents partying next door; people living in the third or fourth generation in an agglomeration might be annoyed by new inhabitants next door who roam this city differently, pursue slightly different professions or some well-established professions in a slightly different way; new citizens might be confused by ritualized conversations, celebrations, by cleaning personnel or construction sites with which everyone else seems to be totally comfortable with; a bi-national family of diverse composition might still be annoyed by tiny and minuscule noises the new partner of her son might make, when he enjoys a meal at their table.

In all these cases the annoyance experienced by listeners and city dwellers has nothing to do with a level of volume or certain painfully high or low frequencies, harsh sonic attack levels or even the musical category of a dissonance. The history of the discourse around noise and unwanted sound shows again and again the affective, cultural, and primarily contextual, even experiential foundation for the highly emotional rejection of certain sonic traces resulting from everyday activities. Even after the invention and implementation of noise regulation measures since the early twentieth century³⁸ the public discourse around wanted, granted and unwanted sounds is still the main driver for new regulations. Consequently, the fine line between disrupting noise and pleasurable sounds, between painful disturbance and energizing, maybe even invigoration motivation is again and again being negotiated anew.

This process of negotiating noise³⁹ is on the one side being triggered by primarily cultural transformations such as reorganizations of the public discourse, introduction of new powerful roles for younger citizens, for women, for immigrants, and for people from all areas of the intersectional spectrum. As soon as the acknowledged members of society do not need any longer to pretend to belong to an abstract category of a bourgeois citizen, who needs to give at least the impression to be a male, white, alphabetized, officially registered, employed, cisgender, heterosexual European, then suddenly other aspects come into play. Maybe previously annoying sounds of neighbors can be experienced as inspiring? Maybe the dissonant rehearsal sounds of some kids next door can be experienced as a joyful celebration of a quirky domestication of musical traditions and practices? Maybe the new machines a co-worker brought into the workspace do not trigger repulsion but curiosity and an eagerness to learn? Maybe a glimpse into an approaching future lifestyle and work habit?

This air of futurism, of futurity, maybe even of an exciting, positively shocking newness, of a potential way of living just at hand is already often being connected to new inventions of capitalist technology as briefly mentioned in an earlier section of this contribution. This holds true for the introduction of the railway, of the ringtone of a telephone, of the airplane, the automobile or, more recently, the delivery drone. All these technologies, this is one of the major insights of Karin Bijsterveld and her research team,⁴⁰ started out to be signaling a desired future, an embraced modern lifestyle and, virtually, all benefits a contemporary and up-to-date consumer citizen would hope to be associated with. The other of these sounds was embraced as an excitement, sometimes even an unsuspected aphrodisiac like in the example of the musical and bruitist avantgardes.⁴¹ However,

38 cf. Thompson 2002

39 Groth and Mansell 2021

40 Bijsterveld 2008; Bijsterveld et al. 2012; Bijsterveld 2014

41 Bijsterveld 2008

over the years the rare and spectacular encounters with these new machines become more and more everyday experiences. And as they tend to occur more often and even to be clustered in certain times of the day or of the year they start to be experienced as annoying. Bijsterveld shows this very clearly with the sound of airplanes and automobiles.⁴² The utopian quality of these sounds, the desire to live with these excitingly new machines vanishes. What remains are sounds that seem to be louder than ever, harsher and more distorted than ever, and new forms of clustered, sonic inconveniences. They result then in efforts to collect the public unrest and protest⁴³ and to channel this unrest into new methods to quantify and to conform (or to falsify) claims of unbearable and painful noise in the public sphere. The utopian sounds have turned into annoying, then painful sounds – and this psychological strain lead not only to articulations of protest but inspired also new scientific and research-based methods to measure, to evaluate and to understand the impact and the potential damage of these sounds. In the end, it led to new *sonic skills*⁴⁴ and to a further progress in the utilitarian and functional approach to sound:

“In modern life, sound becomes a problem: an object to be contemplated, reconstructed, and manipulated, something that can be fragmented, industrialized, and bought and sold.”⁴⁵

The sonic other and its utopia can thus lead to an even more refined utilitarian functionalization of all its aspects. Yet another example for the sonic dialectics of modernism.

4. An Escape to Recreate

While I was walking at the beach I was listening to a podcast. However, unlike the sound piece by Hildegard Westerkamp cited earlier, this piece does not represent or imagine a particular beach itself. It bears next to no relation to the environment in which I am listening to it. Already in this thematic quality it represents a welcome escapist audio artifact with impressive recreational qualities. In the early twenty-first century this is not an exotic practice, at least in networked societies in which mediated communication and consumption dominates every single day of work and life. The ubiquity of access to sound sources and archived sound productions in a seemingly endless stream can seem like a basic human

42 Bijsterveld 2008

43 Thompson 2002

44 Bijsterveld 2018

45 Sterne 2003: 9

right to younger citizens. At any point in time and at any point in space close enough to any sort of wireless network, be it a mobile phone mast or an internet router's antenna, it seems possible to simply select the sound source one wishes to listen to – as long as one belongs to a social class that has the financial means to purchase the required hardware and contract. As long as this form of capital is given access it is provided and can be expanded into a pervasive lifestyle.

The materiality of listening is in all these cases only seemingly freed from the constraints of the apparatus. In previous decades a particular position in relation to or a direct cable connection with the sound source needed to be provided. Headphones were the first tools for listening to recorded sound⁴⁶ and they were regarded as a leash that binds listeners to technology. In times of wireless connections and freemium contracts with streaming services and all sorts of other music distribution platforms within social media, it might seem as if mediated listening must be considered as freed from all previous hindrances, all the tedious ties and leashes as well as the complex expert knowledge for using one of the highly elaborated apparatuses.

However, the constraints to listening and listening apparatuses are nowadays less of a hardware issue – though sometimes they still are, also regarding class and the more fortified divide between a global north and a global south. In the 2020s the constraints to listening are more an issue of software, politics and sensory regimes. To enjoy the apparent freedom or recreative quality that streaming services and devices can provide, one needs to agree to particular contracts, largely expanding the rights of the service provider to do business with monitoring one's listening behavior. Surveillance capitalism⁴⁷ is the framework that indeed constraints a lot of our listening and general consumption habits.

Still, as soon as we might log into our preferred service provider with access through one of the most advanced mobile listening devices, surely including a pair of wireless headphones, it is possible for citizens in the global north to experience a sort of freedom. I can roam across the beach and listen to a wide range of music, sound performances, lectures or podcasts from virtually all around the networked planet. I might experience this form of freedom viscerally, audibly, extending all over my sensory corpus:⁴⁸ I might choose to listen to a podcast from the collective *The Heart*. Since 2015 they published 65 episodes and explored intimate self-reflections, personal memories and thought experiments around relationships, sexual encounters and body images, self-images. I listen to one of their newest episodes *who taught you to be white?* From the series *Race Traitor*.

Walking across the beach of Amager Strand I was listening to this episode: the author, Phoebe Unter, as „a dyke, as a feminist who feels like I'm living my

46 cf. Sterne 2003

47 Zuboff 2019

48 Schulze 2018

politics, that I am living a liberated life as a woman, I want to take up as much space as possible: I wanna yell – and tell off misogynist men.”⁴⁹ She explicates and reflects upon how this self-image clashes with her role in society and culture as a middle-class gentrifier and a factual, economic and societal oppressor and adversary of people of color she connects to affectively on the one side; but on the other side she realizes that her very own actions, her milieu and family recurrently were sources of discrimination and oppression – even if she personally would have objected against this. Materially, socially, politically, professionally she profited from the racist bias in her home city of New York.

I chose to listen to this podcast, *who taught you to be white?*, to listen to sounds, experiences, narrations that might differ radically from my personal experience right now; in this respect my choice was motivated by a somewhat escapist and recreational urge. But, listening to this podcast was anything but escapist: it turned out to be highly political, highly personal and indeed affecting my self-reflection, my personal thoughts about racist structures in Danish society, in Copenhagen right now; how people of color are actually these days subject to more discrimination in this city than before. How moving into specific quarters of this city does not seem any longer that easy for some people of color – and even further relocation into other parts of the country seems to be required. This is a racist law by its very definition. Political action needs to be taken, so that skin color and cultural heritage might not determine how society treats you and forces you to relocate. Living an antiracist life requires this action.

According to Sara Ahmed I need to act.⁵⁰ It is not just sufficient to ruminate and reflect upon the hardships of immigrants and people of color. It requires us to address these hardships. Antiracism is not just a speech-act but needs to result in everyday actions. These everyday actions, when living an antiracist life in Copenhagen, would then need ask from us to take effect in regard of people of color, of supporting and arguing for their causes; it extends to protesting against laws and regulations that do not support an antiracist approach. In this way, this listening experience that I initially intended as some sort of pastime activity for recreation with an escapist taint to it, has turned into a form of personal, substantial recreation: a regeneration of self-reflection, self-image, and self-commitment to future actions.

It is the material corporeality of listening, the actual sensory and sonic experience that takes effect on a person, on me.⁵¹ The intended recreational moment actually has opened up this opportunity for understanding, relating and accepting hitherto unknown or unfamiliar thoughts and reflections, critique and perspective. Obviously, the apparatuses have not turned invisible or irrelevant.

49 Unter 2020: 12:09

50 Ahmed 2004

51 Schulze 2022

They still exist, they still guide and limit our listening experience, they restrict and grant access. They represent the protocols materialized. However, they also opened up this opportunity of ubiquitous access that allowed a process of learning and of understanding within a *dérive* from everyday routines. Even the most corporate and excessively capitalist apparatus structure can provide an environment for progressive thinking, insights, reflection, critique and transformation. It might be that this is indeed one of the reasons for its ongoing seductive and generative power. Even when I indulge into its most convenient, lazy and perfidious services this might still contribute to its thorough deconstruction. Or it might just solidify its future contribution to global destruction. A sonic dialectic of modernism is again at play here.

Coda: What Might a City Be?

In the weeks and months of 2020 and 2021 the plazas and streets in larger cities all over this planet did undergo a rather unexpected transformation. Traffic was reduced and sometimes approaching close to zero. People were rarely seen outside. Mostly those could be seen, who were employed by delivery services and essential businesses of societal and national importance who still roamed the streets. It was, to be perfectly clear, a largely classist segregation that happened: those with the benefit of dwelling at least in the upper middle-class were allowed to stay at home and avoid most of the known infectious encounters; those who were forced into a lifestyle below that line were still forced to work in often only scarcely disinfected meat packaging industry, in supermarkets, and all sorts of industries and providing fundamental services for their society to survive and continue their familiar everyday lifestyles.

At the point of writing this, late in summer of 2021, it feels much too early to reflect on a potentially transformative, maybe damaging, maybe dialectically beneficial effect that this extreme experience might result in. Some consumer citizens assume that pandemic effects can from now on be neglected, others fear that virus variants might raise their ugly heads in droves and throw us again and again into severe societal, economic and personal struggles. This prolonged insecurity and lacking clarity of further developments in the pandemic also makes it hard to assess how our habitats and our experience of it might transform in the next years and decades.

Personal dreams and desires of some city dwellers might inspire them to transform their lifestyles these days. However, one should not underestimate the impact of capitalist economies and its mediated consumer culture. The resilience and inertia of implemented routines and structures on a planetary scale might just prevail, again. The consumer citizens of today will not just turn into mindfully

reflected geniuses of sustainable crafts and of a deep respect for endangered ecological hyperobjects. The desire to return to excessive transcontinental traffic, to holiday resorts on remote islands and to exotic produce from postcolonial plantations is huge. To experience again this illusion of a supposed normality of life many of us seem to need to repress their memories of all the horrific, saddening, and depressing experiences throughout these many months of the pandemic.

However, having now had a glimpse of a different world and having been forced, partially, to observe our collective behavior, in all its paradoxes and inconsistencies, this experience might come into play now as the climate catastrophe does indeed hit tangibly and severely all countries around this planet with wildfires, excessive heat, devastating floods or surprisingly cold areas. The sonic experience of the city, be it a national metropolis, a more regional hub, or a global megacity will be affected by these transformations for sure. They will surely draw some people from the upper middle-class upwards to a more reclusive cocooning and fatalist ignoring of climate transformations. Gated communities will be even more gated and directed inward, the expansion of new sound reproduction and noise abatement technologies is foreshadowing this future development. What can be designed and altered and made more agreeable by means of expensive technology will be used to this end. It already is an immensely wasteful technology at the upper ends of the societal spectrum.

At the same time, life in the cities will undergo transformations already happening, though surely in a conflictuous way. Transformations into more sustainable lifestyles in some, maybe more privileged, but not super rich quarters will be struggling with more violence ridden, maybe even radically antidemocratic and authoritarian tendencies, possibly statewide and on an international level. The three concepts of the city I addressed in the introductory section of this contribution will surely expand their relevance and impact: a smart city ruled by surveillance capitalism, an agglomeration of precarious housing, an upper middle-class playground. How will this complicated bricolage of lifestyles, desires, levels of digitization and forms of employment, economies and aesthetics then sound? What might be the sonic experience of the late twenty-first or early twenty-second century?

Hard as it is to make such a prognosis, it seems clear that technological advancement as well as societal rifts will continue to progress. On top, it is not unlikely that both of these factors might produce surprising and radical events that create leaps in both areas of development that none of us right now were capable or even willing to predict. Sonically, from my perspective within an anthropology of sound, I would assume on the one hand that the expansion of audio technology will continue, will colonize our bodies with all sorts of gadgets, appliances, tools, and technological ramifications. We might be hearing less and

less with our eardrum and hearing nerves and more and more with areas of our bodies sensible to sensory and sonic experiences. On the other hand, I can easily see luddite and radically reformatory if not revolutionary movements being evermore present or important in our societies. The protest against a wasteful, destructive, genocidal and suicidal economy on a planetary scale has not even substantially begun and I expect these protests to continue, to widen and to even be more and more radical, maybe even revolutionary. The protagonists of *Fridays for Future* or *Extinction Rebellion* have nothing to lose but the threat of a worldwide climate catastrophe: they have a world to win. It might then well be that our habitat changes again radically from the time it was dominated by aristocratic and theocratic rule in Europe and on other continents. Will we even be able to recognize cities such as Berlin or Copenhagen in 2121 – architecturally, socially, sonically?

It is not impossible to imagine a future of capital cities in which our contemporary places of worshipping consumerism and financial hubs represent nothing more than ruins of a world vanished long ago. And so might have vanished also the capitalist dispositives, aesthetics and economies of sound production. An economy that developed at some point in history can as easily and as quickly again disappear. Or will it? I would wish to listen to the musical entertainment and rituals and interpenetrations that will characterize life in the twenty-second century. The anthropology of sound for the 22nd century is not even outlined right now. Let's listen to it.

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Abstract

Habitat og Erfaring

Dette bidrag giver en introduktion til forskning og kunstnerisk praksis i soniske agglomerationer fra et lydantropologisk udgangspunkt. Artiklen består af fire dele, hvor forfatteren gennemgår, sanser og erfarer en agglomeration som København ved at anvende de metoder, praksisser og udforskende tilgange, som introduceres i denne artikel. Forfatteren starter med „Spatial Volumes, Secluded and Eroding“ (del 1), fokuserer derefter på „Protocol and Dérive“ (del 2), „The Noise of the Other“ (del 3), „An Escape to Recreate“ (del 4) og stiller mod slutningen spørgsmålet „What Might a City Be?“. Ved denne erfaringsbaserede tilgang og lytning som metodologi udfoldes den urbane lydoplevelse gennem nyere forskningstilgange inden for eller tæt på lydstudiernes felt.